

ARMENIAN ALATANČ' 'DUCK?'

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Arm. *alatanč'* is not noted in the *NHB*, and is mentioned first in Adjarian's *HAB*, where it is glossed as 'a type of bird.' The term appears only once in a poem by Ananias Shirakatsi (1896: 8). The passage reads as follows (acc. *HAB*): յորժամ աղաղանչք ձայն առնեն ընդ առաւօտս՝ ձմեռն նշանակէ. յորժամ առ ծովեզերք թռնովք զջուրսն հարկանեն, գլուզմունս ամպոց նշանակէ "When the *alatanč'*-birds cry out at dawn, it signifies winter; when they beat the water of the seashore with their wings, it signifies nimboïd turbulence." It is reasonable to assume that its name is onomatopoeic,¹ with the root *atat-* bearing the suffix *-anč'*, as in *kanč'* 'a cry,' *kanč'em* 'to cry.'

There are a number of descriptive points that can help us narrow down the types of bird the *alatanč'* might be. The designation 'seashore,' (*covezr*) of course implies that this bird lives next to a large body of water. The southeastern coast of the Black Sea is certainly possible, and Ananias was known to have studied,

1. Note a name for the rooster, *ak'atat*, having certain similarities.

in the seventh century, in Trebizond, an appropriately located city.² Less likely are references to Lake Sevan and Lake Urmia since each is traditionally called a 'lake' (*lič*) by the Armenians.

Though there is no lexical tradition for this bird, it is clear that it is a sea bird, with a dramatic call. There are also other clues. Because Ananias notes that the *alatanč'* is loudly vocal in the autumn, it would likely be a migratory bird, either coming to the south-east Black Sea, or departing from there. Large migratory sea-fowl are highly vocal in the autumn, when they intend to depart for a more southern area, or when they arrive for the winter from the north.

The curious reference to the beating of wings in the shallows is also helpful. Ananias relates that to stormy weather, and it is a useful observation for many migratory surface-feeding water-birds will engage in this behavior just before a storm. At that time numerous flying insects would be low, perhaps responding to barometric pressure, and small fish would rise to the surface to feed on them. At this time a surface-feeding bird would stir up the water, in which the fish are near the surface, to facilitate its feeding.³ Also of interest is Ananias' onomatopoetic description of the call: it must have been loud and punctuated. Let us consider certain birds.⁴

Surface-feeders in north-east Armenia, such as the kingfisher,

2. I wish to here thank James Russell for his helpful comments on the life of Ananias of Shirak.

3. Other ornithologists disagree on the etiology of this beating behavior, and Peter Reading (per lit.) denies that this behavior is linked to barometric pressure and the lowering of winged insects.

4. For the presence of certain of these migratory species in north-east Armenia, see Mary Greppin, 1985.

pelican, cormorant and gulls, are not usually migratory, nor would their behavior be described as Ananias noted. There are a variety of grebes, loons and ducks, such as the ferruginous duck, the shoveler, scaup, goldeneye, wigeon, teal, the black-throated and red-throated loons, and six species of grebe, all of whom inhabit the appropriate area. These would all be migratory surface-feeders. However, except for the ducks, their calls are insufficient⁵, for they are more given to whistles, wheezes and whoops than to a punctuated *agh-agh*. Additionally, the osprey, sea-eagle and the various terns are not the right feeders. Of particular interest, though, are three ducks. The merganser has a distinctive call (Cramp 1977: 678, and Bruun 1970: 66), described as *ga-ga-ga*; similar is the call of the shelduck (Cramp 1977: 461, Bruun 1970: 56) and, to a lesser extent, the mallard⁶ (Cramp 1977: 514, Bruun 52).⁷ The merganser, mallard and shelduck are all

5. Their behavior would not be quite right, either. Loons are not surface feeders, and along with the grebes and the goldeneye they dive below the surface to feed. Further, grebes, during late autumn and winter, tend to be in deep water, far out to sea.

6. There could be no end of argument about how to represent the calls of birds, for certainly English phonetics are inadequate to reproduce the appropriate sounds. Nevertheless, we do find a large amount of near-agreement on the call of ducks. And though different cultures and languages differ somewhat, there is surprising unity.

7. Ducks are poorly described in Armenian literature, and the most common term, *bad*, largely refers to the domestic duck. Non-domestic ducks are called simply *badvayreni* 'wild-duck'; there are two other terms, *badičon*, which has an uncommon diminutive form (-*ēč*, -*on*), and *mrtimn*, which is probably a teal

migratory and would fit into the behavioral patterns set down by Ananias.

One might also suspect certain geese, but they are unlikely. Although we do not know the distribution of geese in the south-east Black Sea during the first millennium, only one species now is known there, the white-fronted goose. Further, the honking of migrating geese would probably not be interpreted as anything approaching *agh-agh*.

Thus, of large migratory sea birds, the merganser, mallard and shelduck are distinct possibilities; a type of goose is unlikely and the other water-fowl do not have an appropriate call nor the proper behavior. Thus we can narrow our range of birds to three ducks, the merganser, shelduck or mallard, and our gloss for the *atałanč*, would then be 'a type of migratory duck.'

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or garganey (Greppin 1978:29-33). The medieval poet, Yovhannes Vardapet, describes the call of the domestic duck *vag-vag* (Greppin 1978: 31).

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